OUR SHORT STORY PAGE

THE TATTOO

By Mary Raymond Shipman Andrews

IT is seldom that a plot happens in real life. Dramatic incidents are plenty, and people in general do not distinguish, yet there is a vast difference.

There is a tale which happened and which seems to me well-fashioned, yet because I was in it, I may not trust my own judgment, so I will tell the tale and let it be judged.

It began in Washington when my lad Philip was five years old; and such a handsome boy that I found myself conspicuous wherever I went with him. On a day I had him in a big shop, in the elevator, going down. He did not like the plunge and he clutched my hand while the machine slid, stopped, and dropped with a hideous suddenness.

Next to me stood a very tall woman who had come in at the last stop. I felt her stir as everyone looked toward us, and she bowed her head as a flower might bend on its stalk over Philip.

"The dear little soul!" she said.

Then I felt a quick movement and heard an exclamation, but I rather expected people to be startled by the good looks of my son. I simply checked off one more person of discrimination in my mind, and the boy and I left the elevator and hurried to our cab. I put the youngster in and stopped to give the driver an order, and at that moment there was a touch on my arm.

I turned quickly. There was the tall woman of the elevator. I saw her plainly in this clearer light and realized at once that she was uncommon. She was tall beyond the measure of women—five feet eleven inches I knew afterwards. She was not young—I think about sixty years old—and her hair was strong silver. Her eyes were gray and large, there was color in her cheeks like a girl's bloom. The face was radiant. And about her was the quality which asserts itself without assertion—distinction. She was unmistakably "somebody."

I saw all this as I stood at the curbstone, Phil regarding us earnestly from the cab.

"I beg your pardon," she began, "but I couldn't let your little boy get away. It's such a big world—I might not have found him again. May I speak to him?" and she bent toward him. "Will you shake hands with me?" and Philip put out one hand with friendliness and pulled his cap over his left eye with the other—careful training and a chin elastic battling for the mastery.

A laugh rang out, which was astonishingly young and fascinating and delightful. I never heard a laugh so spontaneous, except in children. She turned to me with her eyes dancing.

"He's a charming person, this son of yours," she said eagerly. "And so like! It's a miracle! But I haven't told you—I am unpardonable. You will forgive an old woman." Her smile would have made me forgive real things. "The child is exactly like my own boy as he used to be—indeed it's not fancy—it's a resemblance. I saw it in the elevator, and then I thought I must have imagined it, because Philip is always in my mind. So I have followed you to see. And it's a stronger likeness than I thought. It's like having my child little again to look at him."

"I'm very glad," I told her. "And it's strange, but this is a Philip, too."

"No!" she said. "Certainly Providence led me to that elevator." And then, after a second's pause: "You mustn't think I'm kidnapping you, but I feel as if I couldn't lose you and your boy. Won't you let me know you? I am Mrs. Gordon. I live in Washington. I hope you will let me show you my son's pictures and prove how extraordinarily your son is like him. Will you?"

Of course I said yes, and in a minute she had my address. I knew well enough that I was honored and that I had been talking to a great lady.

"Who is Mrs. Gordon?" I asked at dinner that night. There were ten people at the table and they all happened to hear, and I think seven or eight answered with some variation of "You surely must know." And then my host gave me a short history of her.

Mrs. Gordon was a daughter of Nathaniel Emory Hewitt, who had been Governor of Delaware, Secretary of State, Ambassador to France—a well-known man. The girl had visited in England and had met and married young Lord Heringstone, and a few years later he had died, leaving her, people said, not too unhappy, for apparently he was everything that a woman is well rid of—and with a child of three or four. A year or two later her father had been made minister to France, and, as Mrs. Hewitt was dead, she had gone to be at the head of his house. She lived there three years, and at the end of that time her engagement was announced to Admiral Gordon, an Englishman who had a splendid fighting record.

"How she did it—that clever woman—I don't see," said Mr. Van Arden. "He had a great position. She met everybody English worth meeting.

I was glad to be at home the next afternoon when Mrs. Gordon came. While Philip explained the puppy in detail I watched the transparent, expressive face; a face more filled with youth than many of eighteen years.

"I see," she consulted with Phil earnestly, "the puppy can run faster because he has four legs and you have only two. But he hasn't any hands at all, or arms. Will you bring this charming person to lunch on Thursday?" she demanded with an impulsiveness like a summer breeze, as unexpected as welcome. Of course, we accepted the invitation for Thursday.

On Thursday, in the large house where she lived, it appeared to me that the rooms were filled with pictures of my boy. It was odd to see him looking at me from so many strange corners—Philip as a baby, as a toddler of two, as a strapping, square man of four, and again, with his legs beginning to lengthen, just as he was now—only all in unknown clothes. It was strangest to see him grown older—like a prophecy—at seven and nine and fifteen and twenty, a splendid broad-shouldered youth keeping his promise of beauty. The pictures culminated in the strong face, still with my lad's eyes, of Lord Heringstone at thirty-five, a good face, which explained his mother's light-heartedness. The son has inherited from the right side; she was satisfied with him.

I looked at one likeness after another, and saw, as she showed them to me, that this son was the cornerstone of her life. It seemed unreasonable that a woman like this should go through life without a genuine love affair. The first marriage must have been simply two stages, delusion and disappointment, the second might have been convenience or ambition—even affection—anything but love.

Philip, when he had been extracted, lumpy and wedged, from his coat and entanglements, stalked to a table where stood a painting on ivory of a child, he regarded it with earnestness, and Mrs. Gordon and I waited. "That's me," he decided, and turned—the question being settled—to examine the room.

"Don't stop him—let him do what he chooses. No, I don't want him to be careful. I don't care what he breaks"—she threw at me, as I tried to guard priceless vases and carved pillars out of Florentine churches, and cobweb old embroideries, from the stumbling fingers. "It's a gift out of Heaven to see him. It's throwing off thirty years. Are you too young a woman to imagine how that seems to a woman?"

She was down on her knees by the boy with an arm about his white-linened figure.

"Philip—listen. I've lost my boy. He's across the ocean, and I can't have him all the time. Will you come often and let me pretend you're my boy? And whenever mother will come we'll like that better. Will you?"

Philip looked straight in her eyes, considering. "Yesh, I will," he said at length. His fat hand went up slowly, for he was a deliberate lad always, to her cheek. "I lovesh you," he said.

When he came out crumpled from Mrs. Gordon's arms she lifted her face and her eyes were dim. But Philip had no sentiment.

"Mother told me not to mush my blouch," he reproached her.

It got to be a familiar event to see Philip driving off behind Mrs. Gordon's horses, sometimes decorously inside with his nurse, but oftener associating with the liveried gentlemen on the box—which he preferred. The beautiful woman's affection was wide enough to take me in, so that often I went with him, yet she certainly was happiest when she had him alone. More than once I met my small person driving in the city, with his foster-mother, and received, if he happened to be concerned with the horses, a preoccupied salute. It was so that affairs went on for three years, the tie becoming closer, until Mrs. Gordon counted for much in my life, and Philip at least for much in hers.

Two years after the encounter in the elevator Philip and I went to her one day for lunch. I sat at the piano, playing, after the meal, when through the chords I heard a crash, and I whirled toward where I had last seen Philip, for his freedom here was so insisted upon that I was always alert. He stood by a cabinet whose glass door he had opened; a dagger set with jewels was in his hand, and on the floor lay a vase or loving-cup, with three gold handles, broken. It had stood in the cabinet, and he had knocked it over in reaching for the knife.

"Oh, Phil!" I gasped. "I told you to be careful."

But Mrs. Gordon had flown to him. "You mustn't scold Philip," she objected. "It was my fault. I told him he could open any of the cabinets. He never does till he asks, and I trust him. I trust him as much as ever. We all have accidents; it isn't his fault."

The lad stood, his blond head white against the dark curtains, the knife in his hand, at his feet the broken bright china, the gold handles glittering. He stared at me with wide eyes. I see the picture whenever I think of that day, and into it sweeps a radiant, tall presence protecting my boy.

"I'm so sorry," I gasped again. "I can't tell you how sorry—it's such a lovely cup."

"Don't be sorry," she said, and then I saw her look down at the pieces, and I saw her face change.

"Oh!" I cried. "It's something you care for a great deal!"

The big, dusky room was silent. Mrs. Gordon stood with Philip's yellow head against the long, black lines of her figure; her eyes did not lift from the wreckage. "Yes" she said, "I do care for it." Then the lovely gray eyes flashed up, and she smiled as whole-heartedly as sunlight.

"What it stood for can't be lost" she said. "It's only broken china—it's only a sign—Philip is a real thing." She bent and kissed his hair. "Come, laddie, we'll pick up the scraps." In a moment she had them on a table by a window, while Phil and I hovered anxiously.

It was a curious thing—a large loving-cup, of Sevres china, with three handles of Eastern looking, very yellow gold. Across one side of it sprawled in orange color a two-headed dragon.

"PHILIP, LISTEN. I'VE LOST MY BOY."

She drew a breath and clasped her long fingers behind her head.

"It's strange to be talking about him," she interrupted herself. "I've never done it. He was the only man in the world. I never saw anybody like him. He was everything—clever, good, beautiful—" She stopped and glanced at me and laughed. "You'll think I'm a silly old person; but you know everybody has a love affair once, and mine missed the conventional ending. I never got over it.

"He had plenty of faults," she went on, "but there was no fault in him to me. He was headstrong and quick-tempered and likely to do something irrevocable at second's notice. But self-forgetting always to absurdity—it was not in him to be small. It was perhaps his bigness of all sorts which seemed so perfect to me—I'm so big in one way myself. If he had lived he would have been a great man.

"You are too young to remember," she went on, "but it was at a confused time in French history, after the war with Germany. The republic was struggling to its feet and there were factions organized ready to push it over. The Bonapartists hoped to get back to power; the Orleanists waited with the Count of Paris ready to seize the throne; the Legitimists had the love of Chambord at their heart; the undercurrent of French politics was a whirlpool. He was a warm friend of the President. His life was an obstacle in the way of a faction, and I trembled; but he laughed. His safety was the last thing he worried about. Yet—" she stopped. "That comes later. I mustn't jumble things.

"Well, my dear, he cared for me. He had difficulty in making me believe it; but about my own feeling I never had any doubt. He was instantly, as he has always stayed, the only man in the world. I had never—"

She stopped and considered, and turned her great eyes on me.

"I had never been in love" she went on, and left me to think what I might.

Then she was silent till I began to be afraid she would not tell me any more. After a long minute I ventured to speak.

"But," I began, "something happened."

"He had this made for me" she said, and she put the orange dragon's broken back together. "It was like a tattoo done on his arm when he was a youngster in Japan. He went there on a war ship, and he and the other boy officers got themselves tattooed. He showed it to me. He rolled up his sleeves rowing on a lake at a country place, and I was fascinated. It was the first tattoo I had ever seen. I asked to see it once after. Then at a breakfast in the country, outside of Paris, which he gave for my father, my wife was put in this. He had had it made at the Sevres manufactory—the tattoo duplicated. The handles were taken from an old Japanese cup. You see it is curious gold." She smiled at the dragon reminiscently, her thoughts far from me. "How astonished I was! I thought simply that my wine glass had been forgotten; and then a footman placed this huge thing before me with a flourish. I remember how my father laughed and how the French servants stood smiling at me from a corner as I looked up. And the bank of violets on the table—and the bees and the sunlight outside—spring in France! I remember it like yesterday." I kept very still.

"That was in the brightest time, before words had crystallized what we felt. It was as bright and as evanescent then as a rainbow, light and brightness and color—and not either right or wrong, because unsaid and undefined. That was my happiest time. Afterward, when he used all his strength to make me marry him; when he won over my father to help him, it was hard. My father thought I ought to marry him," she spoke as if to herself.

"But you did not," I burst forth. "How could you not?"

Mrs. Gordon's gray eyes turned on me. "How could I?" she asked. "I was engaged to the Admiral."

I was too eager now to be afraid. "To the Admiral!" I gasped. "Then?"

"Yes. He was off on a cruise—two years. We were to be married when he came home. It was not known because of his absence."

"But," I protested, "how could you stop for that? You weren't in love with the Admiral—you were with the Duke. It meant his happiness and yours—you two, young and full of vitality against an old man perhaps not capable of intense happiness. It meant giving up a great thing for a small one."

"Oh, no; oh no, it didn't." The beautiful face showed no anger, but impetuous dissent. "It meant holding to the greatest thing, that I should keep my word. No real happiness comes from sacrificing others. And if it did, what is honor for if not to lead us through thick and thin? If we might step aside from the narrow road when we saw joy shining down another, what would faith mean, how would my boy walk in the path if my footsteps weren't there? You see, my dear," her full tones rushed on as if saying words many times thought, and her face was lighted as if by fire. "You see it's a mountain climbing affair for everybody, the road of perfect honor, and each woman owes it to her own soul, and to all the other souls of the world, that her footprints should widen the path a little and level it a little. I had promised the Admiral at a time when I thought nothing but my boy would ever matter. I did love him—he knew how—and he was satisfied. His life had been lonely and he trusted to Philip and me to bring into it at the end the good things that other men have all along.

I sighed, convinced perhaps, but unreconciled. "It may have been right," I said; "but I wouldn't have done it—ever. I think you're one of the martyrs."

"Hardly," she answered; and then "There are plenty of people more unhappy than the martyrs.

"But I want to tell you the rest. The Admiral came back and I married him and went away from Paris. Sometimes I was in England, sometimes in America—all over the world. He was Governor of Jamaica at the last and he died there ten years ago.

Her eyes wandered contentedly to the last picture of Lord Heringstone on her desk. "I've never felt that I made a mistake," she said.

"But," I began, "did you never see him again—the Only Man? You spoke as if he were dead."

"Yes," she said. "I saw him once, in London. The Admiral met him at a club and brought him to dinner. We were dining alone, and in the evening my husband had an engagement and left us. Philip was there at first—he was eleven—but he went off to bed, and he and I were alone together. There wasn't a word spoken except commonplace till just as he went.

"'Good-bye,' he said, and he did not touch my hand; but we looked almost on a level as we were.

"'It's the last time in this world,' he said calmly.

"'No.' I threw at him, and he laughed because I was vehement. 'But I disliked having him speak so. "We'll sometimes meet—you're likely to be in London with your—with the Prince. And I'm likely to be here.'

"His eyebrows drew together and he looked hard at me.

"'I may not be here. Things may happen,' he said thoughtfully. 'I've done my work. So, if I drop out and leave not a ripple—' He saw that he was tearing my soul.

"Suddenly he threw out his hands with a gesture I knew. 'This life is not possible. To leave it is best.' As if he weighed each word he went on. 'As long as we have personalities we belong to each other. Since you will have us apart in this world I await another.' He gave me no chance to answer, instantly, quietly, he said good-by and was gone. I never saw him again; no one ever saw him again."

When she did not speak I asked, "What happened?"

"No one ever knew. It's supposed he was assassinated that night. The papers rang with his disappearance for days. There was a strong party in London of those whom he called 'the others,' and he had grown so powerful that they saw in him their worst menace. Such a faction has always men ready to do murder. What he said seemed a premonition of that; it must have been that. He would not have taken his own life."

"How horrible!" I murmured, and then "How wonderful you are! You radiate happiness and yet you have that black shadow—" She turned on me.

"Shadow?" she repeated. "No, sunlight, brightness. You don't appreciate. It is enough for a life. No wonder I've been happy."

Suddenly her manner had flashed into everyday. She was on her feet and peering into the street, dim with fast-falling snow.

A year later than this afternoon in February, Mrs. Gordon, her son and his wife and their one child were drowned in a shipwreck which everyone will remember, one of the most wholesale accidents of these days of horrible accidents—the shipwreck of a huge trans Atlantic liner. Two hundred lives were lost and several families besides this one, whose loss touched me so closely, were wiped out. We found some months later that Mrs. Gordon had remembered little Philip in her will and at the same time there came to me from her lawyers a box which, when opened, I found to hold that Sevres loving cup, the text of the story of the snowy afternoon, which I have tried to tell.

Nothing she could have given me could have seemed so like the touch of her hand as this.

As the boy had brought us together, so it was he who happened last summer on the answer to my question about the future. "What happened?" I had asked her. And she had answered, "No one ever knew."

Through Philip I knew. I should have gone far afield in guessing before I guessed that a hermit monk of the Canadian forests would give me, without a word spoken, a full answer to that question, "What happened?"

It came about in this way: The boy, now eleven, and I, went together last summer to Canada. His father was to join us later at Lake St. John, but in the meantime we were doing Montreal and Quebec together till at last one morning we coasted down the precipice roads of Quebec in a caleche, to take a train for Roberval. The little station was filled with voluble French-Canadiens. We arrived into such a rush and bustle as the Central station in New York never achieves. Suddenly he caught my hand. "Look, mother, the wonderful priest."

I glanced up, startled, straight into the widely opened blue eyes of a tall man close to me—the priest. But he did not notice me. He was staring at Philip as if astounded by the child's face. The look flashed swiftly to me and then it calmed to indifference. I knew this striking and picturesque vision to be a monk of La Trappe, probably from the monastery which stands like a lonely sentinel beyond the farthest edge of civilization, far beyond Lake St. John, down the wild river Mistassini.

Again the monk passed. Anywhere, in any dress, the man would have been remarkable. His white gown flapped about his angles a foot below the long black cape, and his big figure swung along with a vigor which made one think of soldiers and fighting more than of monks and monasteries. He carried his big, square head, as the saying is, like a Prince. Yet the blue eyes were furtive with shyness, like the eyes of a wild thing unused to people. It was impossible to guess his age. He might have been anywhere from forty to seventy.

In a few seconds he disappeared; but when at the last moment before the train started on its rattling way we went to our seats in the tumble-down parlor car, both of us were enchanted to find him seated in a chair across from our own. His strong, square-jawed face was impenetrable, his eyes were fixed on a book of prayers, but as we settled ourselves he suddenly lifted them and opened them wide on Philip and smiled a smile which transfigured his whole look with gentleness. I caught my breath in astonishment, for it seemed to reveal an individuality intense beyond my experience. The child turned to me in wonder.

The cars bumped along, creeping up mountains, through untouched forests, and past wild lakes, the only thread which ties the ancient French settlement of Roberval to the civilized world. As they bumped I tried not to stare at the splendid statue of black and white which sat opposite, motionless, withdrawn. A big yellow topaz ring which he wore drew my eyes like a magnet. Whatever I tried to do I found myself gazing at the stone. Why should he wear a ring, I wondered. His eyes hardly lifted from his prayer book for an hour, for two hours, but all at once he seemed to grow restless, and he picked up a folder of the railroad lying by him and read it here and there, and cropped it and sighed, and went back to his prayer book. Then he stopped reading and stared from the window, his massive face set into sad lines, the blue, clear eyes gazing unseeingly at depths of dark forests and steep mountains. What memories, I wondered, lay back of the face which had softened so extraordinarily to smile at Philip. I recalled the account I had read of the Trappist monks, the most forbidding of all brotherhoods, how they may never speak even to one another, except with the grim greeting, "remember death"; how they dig a part of their own graves every day. I shivered as I thought of these and other gruesome details.

Meanwhile the monk had gone back to the folder; he read it restlessly for half a page and tossed it from him. It was evident that he was in dire need of something that might help him to kill his thoughts. An impulse too quick for reason made me do a thing which I could not have done in cold blood. A magazine lay under my hand and I held it to him.

"Won't you have this?" I asked.

His eyes flashed to mine surprised, and then the wonderful smile changed the stern face again utterly. He was on his feet, and making me a courtly bow as he took it; no word, but the smile and the action were like words, and in two minutes he was devouring the pages like a starved man; it was as if an Earth citizen exiled to Mars should have the first news from his world. While he read, the joggling car tossed the folder at my feet, and I picked it up. It was an advertisement for the Quebec & Lake St. John Railway, and gave pictures and descriptions of places to be reached by that road. Turning the page I came on an account of the La Trappe monastery on the Mistassini River. I read it; it was bare enough, yet full of significance, as I saw the hem of the white gown opposite; and facing the text, running lengthwise of the page, was a picture. I shifted the leaf and saw a group of white-robed men; and in the center, the only one seated, was the priest, who sat across the car reading my magazine. There was no mistaking the face or figure, and on his hand one could see plainly, even in the small photograph, the great yellow topaz. Under the picture I read "The Abbott and Monks of the La Trappe Convent on the Mistassini." My monk was the Abbott.

In the meantime Philip was being a great nuisance. We were in the last car; and he insisted, with the winning and plausible manner which often quiets my reason, that the back platform was the only part of the train really fitted to carry him. Pleading with him to be careful, I weakly let him go there. The door was open. I watched him closely and he held to the rail as he promised, yet I was not comfortable. All this the Abbott knew—he did not look up, yet I knew he knew it. The car bounced on an especial boulder, and he lifted his head sharply, and threw a glance at the boy, clinging enchanted outside; then he looked squarely over at me and shook his head. I should have ordered the youngster in, but I did not. I only smiled gratefully and went out, and saw that Philip was steady and braced with both hands and decided that he was safe, so I went back to the folder, and my conjectures as to who this "wonderful priest" might have been. Ten minutes later the train began to slow down heavily for a station. Then it backed, bumping harder. I saw the monk put down the magazine and go to the open door of the car where the boy stood. I saw him lay his hand on the light hair and I saw Philip look up and say a word in his friendly ways and the Abbott smiled back and shook his head with closed lips. Then suddenly, as if in a play, I saw him catch the boy in his arms and hurl him backward into the passage; the whole train shook and slid as our car plunged against some huge obstacle, and a flying mass of black and white shot through the air from the platform.

It was only five minutes, but it seemed an hour before the car stopped and I was kneeling in the track by the man who had offered his life for my boy's. The splendid figure lay there quiet, whether dead, or broken, or merely stunned I could not tell. Black robe and white were torn from one shoulder, and on the great arm flung out, bared, was tattooed an orange dragon, and above it a crown and yellow fleur-de-lys.